

### **Q 9: Lithotrophy**

Lithotrophy refers to the metabolic process in which organisms, known as lithotrophs, obtain energy by oxidizing inorganic compounds such as hydrogen ( $H_2$ ), sulfur (S), ammonia ( $NH_3$ ), methane ( $CH_4$ ), and iron ( $Fe^{2+}$ ), among others. Lithotrophs include certain bacteria, archaea, and other microorganisms that are capable of oxidizing inorganic substances.

The key feature of lithotrophs is their ability to extract electrons from these inorganic substances, which are used in cellular processes like ATP synthesis to meet their energy needs.

#### **Key Steps in Lithotrophy:**

1. **Oxidation of Inorganic Compounds:** Lithotrophs oxidize compounds like  $H_2$ ,  $NH_3$ ,  $CH_4$ , or sulfur to release electrons.
2. **Electron Transfer:** The electrons generated from the oxidation process are transferred via electron transport chains.
3. **Proton Gradient Formation:** As electrons move through the electron transport chain, protons ( $H^+$ ) are pumped across the membrane, creating an electrochemical gradient.
4. **ATP Synthesis:** The proton gradient is used by ATP synthase to generate ATP, providing energy for cellular functions.

#### **Types of Lithotrophs:**

Lithotrophic organisms are classified based on the inorganic compounds they use as electron donors. The major types of lithotrophs include:

##### **1. Chemolithotrophs:**

**Chemolithotrophs** are organisms that use inorganic compounds as electron donors and oxygen as the electron acceptor (aerobic conditions).

**Example: Thiobacillus** species, which oxidize sulfur compounds, such as hydrogen sulfide ( $H_2S$ ), to produce sulfuric acid ( $H_2SO_4$ ). This process plays a critical role in sulfur cycling in the environment.

##### **2. Nitrifying Bacteria (Nitrifiers):**

These bacteria oxidize ammonia ( $\text{NH}_3$ ) to nitrite ( $\text{NO}_2$ ) and, in some cases, nitrite to nitrate ( $\text{NO}_3$ ), contributing to the nitrogen cycle.

**Example:** **Nitrosomonas** oxidizes ammonia ( $\text{NH}_3$ ) to nitrite ( $\text{NO}_2$ ), while **Nitrobacter** converts nitrite ( $\text{NO}_2$ ) to nitrate ( $\text{NO}_3$ ).

### 3. Sulfate-Reducing Bacteria:

These bacteria reduce sulfate ( $\text{SO}_4^{2-}$ ) to hydrogen sulfide ( $\text{H}_2\text{S}$ ) under anaerobic conditions.

**Example:** **Desulfovibrio** species, which play a role in the sulfur cycle by reducing sulfate in environments with low oxygen levels.

### 4. Methanogens (Methanotrophs):

**Methanogens** are a group of archaea that utilize methane ( $\text{CH}_4$ ) as an energy source and produce methane as a byproduct.

**Example:** **Methanobacterium** species, which are involved in methane production in anaerobic environments like marshes and the intestines of ruminant animals.

### 5. Iron-oxidizing Bacteria:

These bacteria oxidize ferrous iron ( $\text{Fe}^{2+}$ ) to ferric iron ( $\text{Fe}^{3+}$ ) as part of their energy production.

**Example:** *Leptothrix* and *Gallionella* species, which are involved in iron cycling in aquatic environments.

### Ecological Importance of Lithotrophy

- Plays a major role in biogeochemical cycles such as:  
Nitrogen cycle, sulfur cycle, iron cycle
- Helps in soil fertility
- Important in wastewater treatment
- Supports life in extreme environments (hot springs, deep-sea vents)

### Industrial and Environmental Significance

- Used in bioleaching for metal extraction
- Important in bioremediation
- Essential in sewage treatment plants
- Contributes to primary production in environments lacking sunlight

### Examples of Lithotrophic Organisms:

1. **Nitrosomonas:** An ammonia-oxidizing bacterium involved in nitrification. It converts ammonia ( $\text{NH}_3$ ) into nitrite ( $\text{NO}_2$ ), which is a crucial process in the nitrogen cycle.
2. **Thiobacillus:** A sulfur-oxidizing bacterium that converts hydrogen sulfide ( $\text{H}_2\text{S}$ ) into sulfuric acid ( $\text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$ ), playing a key role in the sulfur cycle.
3. **Methanobacterium:** A methanogen that produces methane ( $\text{CH}_4$ ) by reducing carbon dioxide ( $\text{CO}_2$ ) in anaerobic environments, such as marshes or the guts of animals.
4. **Leptothrix:** An iron-oxidizing bacterium that converts ferrous iron ( $\text{Fe}^{2+}$ ) into ferric iron ( $\text{Fe}^{3+}$ ), contributing to iron cycling in aquatic systems.